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ABSTRACT

Data from videotaped conversations in a number of East African languages and in English are used to establish the existence of a preference in the African interactional systems for the use of verbal feedback by listeners in contrast to a preference for the use of non-verbal (gaze, head nod) feedback in English. This difference is related to different understandings of the meaning of gaze behavior and to differences in preferred mutual postural orientation for conversation, deixis, and speaker turn length between the English and the African systems. (Author)

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LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES IN STRATEGIES FOR THE INTERACTIONAL MANAGEMENT OF CONVERSATION

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work by sociologists on the organization of conversation has produced evidence for the existence of a variety of structures in terms of which conversational interactions function. The turn-taking system is discussed in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's 1974 Language article, "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation." A later article in Language by the same group of authors discusses the repair system (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). The system organizing the beginning and ending of conversations was discussed in lectures by Sacks under the label, "the overall structural organization of conversation." Due in part to the recency of this work, there has been little attempt to study the organization of conversation from this perspective in language and cultures other than English. One exception, Moerman 1977, presents evidence that Tai conversation, in at least one aspect, the repair system, functions almost exactly like English.

Because conversation is ultimately at the basis of all social interaction, and because in fact a surprisingly strong case can be made for the genesis in conversation of "abstract" knowledge and more generally for the interactional nature of the creation of knowledge (1), it is of considerable importance to know if indeed the conversational systems of all human cultures operate in ways which are basically the same.

Most anthropologists' instinctive answer to this question is "impossible," but a reasonable argument can be made for suspecting that the above surmise is indeed correct. On an empirical level

1. This is, I believe, one of the major significances of Sack's 1972 article on puns, and also a theme in Chuck Goodwin's 1975 AAA paper.

the list of similarities between Tai and English conversations provided by Moerman is very impressive. On a less specific level, the kinds of systems found to operate in conversation operate with reference to sets of structural positions in conversations (transition-space for turn-taking, 'repair-initiation opportunity space' for repairs (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977,375)) which may be presumed to exist (i.e. to be definable and utilizable by interactors) in all conversations. The systems in which these structural positions are utilized, moreover, appear to have as a primary objective (or 'conspiracy') ensuring that a speaker has a 'fair chance' to speak in the face of a variety of potentially disturbing factors (such as competition between two listeners for next turn). A 'fair chance' for a speaker can be regarded as a kind of minimal requirement for meaningful conversation (anywhere), and hence the possibility of language-independent conversational systems. In general then it can be argued that to the extent that the subtle ways in which conversation is organized are due to the nature of interaction itself (i.e. to the functional requirements which any system which is to organize conversation must be responsive to) then culture- and language-specific conventions may not be found.

In this paper I make no attempt to address in an overall way this question of language/cultural differences in interactional system. I present some empirical evidence for the existence of language-specific differences in the preferred mode (communicational channel) of realizing particular interactional functions (or effecting particular kinds of interactional behaviour) in conversation. I then argue that these differences

have impact on other interactional subsystems and more generally on the kind of interactional work that is accomplished with conversation.

More specifically, the difference in preference for eye contact in interaction between English and a number of East African languages is studied. The massive presence of the difference is first established, and then the existence of an alternative mechanism is described. This mechanism itself allows certain differences in the sequential organization of conversation, and thus will be seen to shed light on the major issue outlined above.

Data from videotaped conversations from a number of East African languages (Kipsigis, Luo, Gusii, Samburu) establish the existence of a preference in the African interactional systems for the use of verbal feedback by listeners in contrast to a preference for the use of non-verbal (gaze, head nod) feedback in English (2). The existence of this latter preference for English has been noted in a number of studies, e.g. Kendon 1970, Birdwhistell 1971. Goodwin's 1975 paper, already mentioned, is especially relevant as he notes that eye contact is a necessary precondition for the initiation of an utterance directed at another. My own work, reported below, fully supports this finding, which by now must be regarded as fully established (3).

2. The non-Africanist reader is cautioned to not generalize this finding beyond the specific languages cited here. The Africanist reader is encouraged to report relevant findings for other African languages and cultures.

3. Parenthetically we note that a low incidence of gaze use has been reported (without data) by Scheflen (1972) for Black North Americans, but with no understanding that this was a piece in a functioning interactional system which could be realized in other modes.

The preference for verbal feedback by listeners in the African conversational systems is related to differences in other aspects of the interactional systems: different understandings of the meaning of gaze behaviour (supportive and interested for English, hostile and rude for the African systems), preferred mutual postural orientation for seated conversation (facing or angled for English, side by side for African), deixis (speaker and listener "points of view" are the same in the African systems, but mirror images of each other in English), speaker turn length (shorter in African conversations), use of and response to negative questions (answers more strongly presupposed in English conversations), etc.

Although they are not examined here, I also claim that there exist other language/cultural differences in the use of particular communicational channels to effect particular communicational functions and that these differences do have an impact throughout the rest of the set of interactional systems which organize conversation for particular cultures. Some examples are the use of syntactic resources versus the use of stress/intonation for signalling marked focus, and the use of hand movements versus the use of syntactic resources as cohesive devices (in the sense of Halliday and Hasan 1976).

I do not of course want to argue that each language is a thing-unto-itself. One of the major outcomes of recent work into a variation-based theory of language universals (see for example E.L. Keenan 1976, 1977), has been the realization that a framework in which attention is paid to specific differences is a viable way, paradoxically, of investigating that elusive creature,

Language, with a capital L, or in our case, Conversation, with a capital C. I suggest as worthwhile tasks for the next stage of investigation the accumulation of further data such as those presented in this paper, and then the elaboration of a general theory of the interactions of the behavioural components themselves in implementing the various functional prerequisites of conversational interaction.

Some of my own data now follow. For four conversations, one between two white English speakers (male and female, university students, VT 46), one between two Kipsigis elders (VT 1-1), one between two Kipsigis secondary school students (one male and one female, VT 27-3), and one between two Luo elders (VT 20-1), I recorded the presence or absence of gaze directed at the other interactor every thirty seconds (this period is considerably longer than the average turn length and so eliminates an intra-utterance effect that might be present). The results are as follows.

	A	B	Mutual
VT 46(English)	19/30	22/30	15/30
VT 1-1(Kipsigis)	3/27	2/27	1/27
VT 27-3(Kipsigis)	5/31	5/31	2/31
VT 20-1(Luo)	10/21	3/21	1/21

in percentages:

	A	B	Mutual
VT 46	63,3	73,3	50,0
VT 1-1	11,1	7,4	3,7
VT 27-3	16,1	16,1	6,4
VT 20-1	47,6	14,3	4,8

The magnitude of contrast involved here would be duplicated with any set of conversations from my data. Note especially the very high (50%) incidence of mutual gaze in the English conversation and the extremely low incidence rates for all of the African conversations. Note also the close agreements between interactors within a conversation, VT 20-1 being the only exception in this regard.

Another way of assessing the utilization of non-verbal versus verbal feedback is to compare the frequency of use of verbal listener feedback in the conversations. In the English conversation the number of 'yeahs' and similar utterances which functioned to indicate comprehension but which were not elicited by a preceding interrogative utterance was 28 out of a total of 266. In the Kipsigis conversation (VT 27-3) the number of such utterances in 266 turns was 73 ($p<0.01$, binomial test).

Verbal and non-verbal strategies have different implications for some fairly obvious matters such as turn length. Given the opportunity to ensure that the listener is attending as a speaker speaks, that speaker need not pause as frequently 'in the course of a turn', but may, provided the listener is attending, construct lengthy turns. Not utilizing non-verbal feedback it is to be expected that the African conversants would create more frequent opportunities for listener verbal feedback, and hence that average turn length would be shorter in these conversations.

In the videotape 46 English conversation the average number of words per turn was 13.2 while in the comparable Kipsigis conversation (27-3) this average was 4.8 ($p<0.01$, t-test). These figures were based on a 73 turn sample in the case of the English

and a 108 turn sample in the case of the Kipsigis. The extremes of the distributions are revealing: there were 37 (34.2%) one word turns in the Kipsigis conversation and 9 (12.3%) one word turns in the English conversation. At the other end of the distributions, there were 3 Kipsigis turns of more than 20 words: 21, 22, and 28. There were 13 such English turns including 46, 48, 50, 78, 81 and 85 word turns (4).

I want to emphasize that the differences in eye contact are differences in preference only. That is, both systems include both mechanisms for feedback. The use of non-verbal behaviour increases dramatically in African conversations which are not dyadic. This may be understood as follows: In all systems an increase in the number of speakers means an increase in competition for the floor. It is clear that non-verbal means are more efficient than verbal ones for this purpose (they take up less sequential space, do not involve potential loss of the floor through giving it temporarily to the listener, etc.). This means that with dyadic conversations we have two possibilities. Either there is more competition for the floor in the English dyadic conversations and less in the African dyadic ones, or there are cultural conventions which operate to keep a system adapted to competition operative in circumstances under which it is strictly speaking not necessary. That is, English dyadic speakers could use less non-verbal feedback but don't. Regardless of which possibility is actually the case it is clear that cultural conventions do operate in this micro-arena even when they are

4. A check on the number of morphemes per word for the Kipsigis conversation shows a figure of 1.77. This corrresponds closely enough to Greenberg's (1954) 1.68 value for English that I haven't made any correction for this factor.

strictly speaking unnecesssary. Even if the second possibility is not the case, and the first one is, then either English speakers in dyadic contexts maintain, by convention, a level of competition which is in a functional sense unnecessary, or African speakers, by cultural agreement, operate with lowered levels of competition in dyadic contexts (5). We may further note that while non-verbal behaviour is more functional under conditions of greater floor competition, it is in general a less preferred alternative: it involves an extra modality, restricts operating freedom, etc.

It will be clear from the foregoing that African speakers and listeners are oriented in conversation to expect frequent and regular verbal feedback from listeners, and that furthermore this means that regular gaps are provided in the production of utterances by speakers in the expectation that listeners will fill these in, and furthermore fill these in with such productions as will not take the floor away from current speaker. This may also be looked at from the point of view of the listener: whose utterances are accorded a floor of their own and are secure from being overlapped. An interesting linguistic difference may be related to this, one which is regularly noted, but has never been

5. Note that some interesting questions are located here. Dyadic conversations, with respect to the question of competition for the floor, are qualitatively different from triadic, etc. conversations. From the point of view of the listener, in a dyadic conversation the only 'competition' is current speaker, who occupies (it will be recalled from Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) a privileged position in the turn-taking system. From the point of view of the speaker on the other hand, greater-than-dyadic conversations present special problems: first that of distinguishing between all-other directed utterances and specific-other directed utterances, and second that of maintaining the floor in a specific-other directed utterance against competition from 'other' others. Gaze is much more effective than verbal behaviour in these (greater-than-dyadic) situations because it is so much more highly directional and allows a speaker and selected listener to insulate themselves from others.

understood in any way: listener responses ir English are subject to very severe mandatory ellipsis constrictions, while the same types of utterance in the African conversations do not even allow ellipsis (VT 46):

G: Aah, Brescia, where're you from?

P: Tronuh (Toronto)

Note that utterances such as

P: I'm from Toronto

are regularly non-occurrent in this position. Contrast the Kipsigis (VT 5-2b):

B: ee, iyapuu ano oo?' 'where do you come from?'

A: apunuu komosito isinee iekemaani, 'I come from down this way.'

Examples such as this are of regular occurrence in the African conversations.

A somewhat more subtle linguistic difference which may result from the "expanded floor" of the African systems is the following (VT 46, English):

G: You mean, like, you didn't come to do Anthropology?

P: No. Like, I wanted Anthropology, I definitely wanted it, but ... (continuation not relevant)

and later in the same conversation

G: Where? Not here?

P: No, I'd like to do the U.B.C.

In each of the above cases P's no's would be realized as 'yes'es' in the African languages, as shown below (VT 27-3, Kipsigis):

A: mm, ki, oo, maatoopwaan ak loorit-is?

B: ee, matakeepwaan ak loorit, keepwaan een kaasiit aap aeeng'

(translation:)

A: And didn't you come in the lorry?

B: yes, we didn't come in the lorry, we came on Tuesday.

In the English questions the negative in the response is extracted from and repeats a portion of the question, but in the African questions the response indicates that the question is taken to be of the general form: "is (not(S)) true?" The English question presupposes the truth value of the questioned negative assertion, but the African sequence does not, and rather, includes it in the domain of the questioned.

This example is in fact typical of many of the differences between the English and the African conversational materials. The English ones usually presuppose more (more precisely, the speaker implicates the listener in more presuppositions than do the African speakers).

The following section is extremely tentative. Although the argument is straightforward, there are a sufficient number of other factors to warrant caution. Given the preferred mutual postural orientations mentioned above, we may note that the "natural" spatial conversational arena for the two participants in a conversation is in front of them and not between them for the African conversants, and between and not in front of them for the English speakers. This has some very interesting consequences, I believe, for deixis systems. In the African systems it follows that the speaker's and listener's orientations are identical, but note that in the English system, speaker's and listener's points of view are not identical. Now consider how we as English

speakers describe the following situation: if there is an object, say a ball, between ourselves and another object, say a table, we say that the ball is in front of the table. If the ball is beyond the table, we say that it is behind the table. That is, in each case, we take the point of view of the table in such a way that we assume it is "facing" us (note that, as discussed in a delightful paper by the late John Kimball (1968), tables and the like don't have faces which are given in nature). In contrast, in each of the African languages discussed, the ball would be described in the first instance as being behind the table and in the second as being in front of the table. This is exactly the opposite of our usage! Speaking metaphorically it is clear that African speakers do not assume a point of view for the table which is opposite their own. Rather they assume that the table has a point of view which is the same as theirs. This difference is exactly what we would expect on the basis of the conversational behaviour.

Another point related to deixis: the linguist A.L. Becker has discussed the use of the first person in English as a kind of unmarked point of reference, and contrasted this with the use of the second person in a number of Southeast Asian languages. He has coined the term "deictic anchoring" for this phenomenon. For example, a letter might begin, "How are things here?", where the "here" means, in our terms, "there." That is, the addressee's point of view is taken (Becker 1978) (6).

6. What is possibly an extreme version of this is Telefol (New Guinea) 'indirect speech' (D. Jorgensen, pers. comm.) where "your friend is hungry" or "your friend departs" are found in place of "I'm hungry" and "I'm leaving." I do not know if this can be related to the oft-noted Melanesian assertiveness (cf. Schieffelin 1975,117-134). Occupying another's place (symbolically invading his body) is certainly open to that sort of interpretation.

With reference to body motion, Birdwhistell has observed that inwardly directed pointing movements are associated with both the first person personal pronouns and with the proximal demonstratives (this, these), while outwardly directed pointing movements are associated with both third person and the distal demonstratives (that, those). We may add to Birdwhistell's pronoun list the second person pronouns which also are associated with outwardly directed movements and note that the contrast is then first versus non-first person in association with distal versus proximal deixis (an additional argument in support of Pete Becker's deictic anchoring concept for English).

A striking difference between the African and the English conversations is that although the African languages have full repertoires of personal pronouns (including both bound and free forms), and although pointing movements are common in association with spatial deictics (which also are well-developed), pointing movements are not associated with pronominal reference. That is, there is a complete absence of either first or second person deictic anchoring.

Furthermore there is a difference in the way the pointing movements are used in the African conversations. Specific locations are pointed to, but there is not a regular and systematic use of a contrast between here/me and there/other. That is, the system is as often gradient as privative (in Trubetskoy's terminology).

Also, needless to say, there is no justification for the association of the "meaning" of the proximal demonstrative with "near to the speaker" and the medial demonstrative with "near to

the listener" with these African languages. The terms have a primarily spatial reference in the first instance, and that spatial reference is to an area in front of the speaker and the listener (in the typical case).

A point related to the preceding (and equally tentative): it has been noted that American English speakers customarily converse at distances which are relatively far apart (with reference to Arabic or Latin American norms (Watson 1970), while I suspect that part of this has to do with the fairly major importance of interactional leg use in this culture (Saries 1977), I think that part is also attributable to the use of the space between interactors in our culture. In African cultures this space need not be used in interaction, and so it doesn't matter if it is filled up (with the interactors' bodies). In fact it appears that in the three African cultures where I studied the effect of distance in detail experimentally (reported in Creider 1977), distance makes no difference whatever. There is a tendency to prefer a closed position when convenient, but a striking feature of the African scene is the huge distances over which people routinely carry on extended conversations.

A somewhat more abstract matter related to the previous discussion: there is an interesting contrast in the style of presentation of discursive arguments (and possibly of the conception of these arguments -- I do not believe that the conception of an argument is an event separate from its interactional realization). Spoken English conversations in my experience tend to utilize either-this-or-that type contrasts with great frequency in argumentation. The African conversations,

however, routinely assume as an unmarked case that the number of arguments or facets or whatever of an issue exceeds two. This is typically given body motional realization by hooking the fingers of one hand over the individual fingers of the other hand as points are made.

I would like now to try to deepen the discussion of interactional style and style of argumentation by taking a short detour, to New Guinea (7). The cover of the third volume of Margaret Mead's The Mountain Arapesh (1971) shows two Arapesh standing face to face blowing flutes. Williams (1930, cited in Schwimmer 1973:178) reports that in Orokaiva sacred flutes which are used in initiation ceremonies are played in pairs by two men facing one another. The flutes are played antiphonally (Schwimmer 1973:183), i.e. conversationally. The Orokaiva and the Arapesh have societies which are characterized by moiety divisions, intra-village feasting, village endogamy and restricted marriage exchange systems. There are other groups in New Guinea, however, which have exogamous communities, generalized marriage exchange systems, and inter-village feasting with chain-like sequences of ceremonial exchange. In at least two of these, the Gimi (Gillison 1977) and the Naugia (Nilles 1940), initiation flutes are played side-by-side and not in antiphonal fashion.

In the East African cultures I have studied flutes are not used ceremonially as far as I know, but singing is very clearly not antiphonal: it is responsorial and choral. Marriage systems

7. I am grateful to Dan Jorgensen for pointing me to the sources cited here and also for discussing many of the points in this paper with me. He is not responsible for any errors of representation or interpretation I make with respect to the New Guinea cultures.

are complex, moities non-existent, etc., but what I find most striking about this comparison is the implication for political order that seems to be part of the face-to-face versus the side-by-side. The Orokaiva and Arapesh, etc. are characterized by "big-men" -- a tendency to crystallize into opposing groups around leaders. With the Kipsigis and other African groups, one doesn't find this at all, but rather a system which is egalitarian in conception and gives to each member of the community the opportunity to be heard out and to participate in a consensual decision. There is clearly much more to be done before a strong case can be made, but I find the possibility that political styles have an interactional foundation or basis a very exciting one.

We are now fairly far afield from our original starting point. Let me close with the following set of observations which brings us back to the beginning. We started out by noting that the African conversants did not make systematic use of interactional gaze behaviour, and in particular did not use it to provide listener feedback. This was in marked contrast to the usage patterns of English speakers. We may go further and note that there is a general tendency in the African interactional systems to orient to the spoken part of the conversation exclusively. This also is in marked contrast to the English systems, where a person's nonverbal behaviour can be and is often oriented to, and where in fact a variety of disciplines have sprung up whose existence depends on the reality of this orientation. Regardless of its validity Birdwhistell's oft-quoted statement that in "normal two person conversation, the verbal components carry less than 35% of the social meaning; more than

95% is carried on the nonverbal band," (8) is one that can only be made in a culture where nonverbal behaviour is in fact a significant part of interpersonal interaction. Similarly the work on verbal deception, 'leakage', and in general the possibility of saying one thing with one's words and another with one's body which is done by psychologists studying nonverbal behaviour (e.g. Ekman and Friesen 1974), only makes sense in a culture such as ours which is oriented to nonverbal behaviour.

In contrast the African cultures are rather singularly unoriented to the nonspoken word as an indicator of interactional meaning. Note that in the African cultures, interactors do find themselves in situations where for reasons of politeness and respect they must say one thing and perhaps mean another, and they are quite aware that this is something which they will encounter in the speech of others. But when it comes to detecting "true" intentions, it is speech which is oriented to and not nonverbal behaviour (9).

8. This particular version is from Knapp (1972:13) who gives no specific reference.
9. This paper has been concerned with one kind of body movement, gaze, in one kind of context, conversation. It would not only be unwarranted, but it would be incorrect to generalize beyond these limits. In East Africa, Africans can (and in fact do as a normal activity) identify individuals ethnically by gait, posture and other aspects of body movement and positioning. In addition there is a repertoire of gestures. These gestures often have lexical equivalents and may accompany such equivalents when uttered in conversation. Body movements also appear to have some function in regulating turn-taking and in preventing overlap. The last two types and functions of body movements are studied in Creider 1977 and 1978 respectively. The first type, social categorization has not been studied, but it would be highly interesting to do so.

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